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Evolution plan

A. Thieu's political strength is now almost nil. At least 38 out of 60 Senators have signed ^a resolution calling for new policies, new leadership, and a government of national union with real power. These include, besides some 18 opposition Senators, about 20 pro-government Senators, not counting another five who were persuaded to withdraw their signatures. Even Senator Tran Van Lam, who has loyally defended Thieu and lobbied against the resolution, stated in private that only radical changes, including departure of prime minister Khiem, offer hope of stabilizing the situation. Similarly Vice-Premier Phan Quang Dan has been privately lobbying for removal of both Thieu and Khiem. Only a handful of thoroughly committed politicians continue supporting Thieu, and even they are privately extremely critical. A hint of declining American support for Thieu would probably change most of their minds. Among Vietnamese politicians the argument is not whether but how Thieu should be replaced: moderates would generally like him to stay on as titular President for the sake of constitutional continuity; more radical politicians would like him to resign. Not only has Thieu's political strength almost evaporated, his credibility, with the Army and the population as a whole, is near zero.

It is almost impossible to envisage ^{THE} reversing the current. Certainly the measures now under consideration, notably a cabinet reshuffle to try to bring in a few forgotten Diemist politicians and very tame oppositionists, would not do so. Such measures might even aggravate the situation by showing that there is no hope for Thieu making real changes.

Thieu's political strategy, in so far as he has one, appears to be to cling to power as best he can. As carrot he is making a few superficial gestures towards the 'loyal opposition' and allowing moderate politicians like ^{Dr.} ~~Dr.~~ Sung and Dr. Do to continue hoping that he may yet organize a government of national union. The stick, probably more important, consists of intensified harrassment of the opposition by arrests of newspapermen and middle level politicians, by closing down the

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last strongly oppositionist newspaper, DAI DAN TOC, and by
closing schools to prevent student demonstrations.

B. THE PROSPECTS OF THIEU RESIGNING OR BEING PUSHED ASIDE DEPEND UPON THE USG ATTITUDE, ALTHOUGH IT MIGHT WELL HAPPEN EVEN WITHOUT ANY CHANGE (OVERT OR COVERT) OF AMERICAN POLICY. THIEU'S MAIN STRENGTH HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE LOYALTY AND DISCIPLINE OF THE ARMY, AND RECENT DISASTERS HAVE SEVERELY SHAKEN BOTH. INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR IS DIFFICULT TO PREDICT, BUT , UNLIKE NGO DINH DIEM, THIEU IS NEITHER A MYSTIC NOR A FANATIC BUT RATHER A REALIST. IF THE EXTENT OF THE OPPOSITION WERE MADE CLEAR TO HIM AND IF HE WERE OFFERED AN HONORABLE WAY OUT--E.G., INDEFINITE LEAVE OF ABSENCE FOR THE GREATER GOOD OF THE NATION--HE MIGHT BE WILLING TO ^{TAKE IT} ~~RESIGN~~. IN 1971 HE MADE A STATEMENT TO THE EFFECT THAT HE WOULD RESIGN IF DOING SO WOULD FACILITATE AMERICAN AID. ALSO UNLIKE DIEM, THIEU HAS FEW IF ANY REALLY DEVOTED FOLLOWERS. HIS SUPPORT IS BASED ALMOST ENTIRELY UPON INTEREST OR CALCULATION. THUS A LAST DITCH DEFENSE OF THE KIND WHICH TOOK PLACE FOR ABOUT 18 HOURS, 1-2 NOVEMBER 1963, IS UNLIKELY. ON THE OTHER HAND, IT IS THE DESIRE TO AVOID ANY SUCH DIVISIVE CLASH, WITH THE ENEMY MUCH NEARER THE GATES THAN IN 1963, WHICH DETERS ARMY ACTION AGAINST THIEU AT PRESENT. THIS CONSIDERATION IS ALSO GIVING PAUSE TO AN QUANG AS WELL AS TO FATHER THANH, WHOSE ORGANIZATIONS MIGHT OTHERWISE BE DEMONSTRATING ALREADY.

THE LIKELIEST SUCCESSOR TO THIEU IS GENERAL NGO QUANG TRUONG, HE IS THE ONLY PERSON, CIVILIAN OR MILITARY, WHO ENJOYS THE ACCEPTANCE OF ALL MAJOR GROUPS: ALL MAJOR FACTIONS OF BUDDHISTS, CATHOLICS, AND, ABOVE ALL, MILITARY. AMONG MANY ELEMENTS HE HAS NOT MERELY ACCEPTANCE BUT STRONG SUPPORT. AN QUANG SENATORS MAU AND HUAN, IN PRIVATE CONVERSATION ON 29 MARCH, EXPRESSED SUPPORT FOR TRUONG AS A PROVISIONAL LEADER, THOUGH MAU'S FIRST CHOICE WOULD BE "BIG" MINH. TRUONG IS THE FIRST CHOICE OF MANY CATHOLICS, SUCH AS BISHOP THUAN OF NHA TRANG. HE IS EXTREMELY POPULAR WITHIN THE ARMY, ESPECIALLY AT THE LOWER AND MIDDLE LEVELS WHERE THE NEED FOR A MORALE BOOST IS CRITICAL. MANY FORMULAS COULD

BE IMAGINED FOR TRUONG ASSUMING POWER. PROBABLY THE SIMPLEST AND SMOOTHEST WOULD BE FOR THIEU OR HIS SUCCESSOR--HUONG OR LAM --TO APPOINT HIM PRIME MINISTER ON THE UNDERSTANDING THAT HE WOULD HAVE REAL POWER AND A MANDATE TO ORGANIZE A GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNION. SUCH A GOVERNMENT WOULD PROBABLY INCLUDE MEN LIKE TRAN VAN TUYEN AND SUPPORTERS OF FATHER THANH AS WELL AS "LOYAL OPPOSITIONISTS" LIKE NGUYEN NGOC HUY AND MODERATES LIKE DR. SUNG. AN QUANG LEADERS, SUCH AS SENATOR TRAN QUANG THUAN, MIGHT PARTICIPATE AS INDIVIDUALS, THOUGH AN QUANG, CONCERNED TO PRESERVE ITS "THIRD FORCE" IMAGE, WOULD BE UNLIKELY TO OFFER OFFICIAL SUPPORT. IT WOULD, NEVERTHELESS, BE MORE COOPERATIVE THAN IT HAS BEEN SINCE THE QUAT GOVERNMENT OF 1965. THE CATHOLICS COULD BE EXPECTED TO GIVE VERY STRONG SUPPORT TO SUCH A GOVERNMENT. IF TRUONG SHOULD NOT BE AVAILABLE, A GOOD SECOND CHOICE MIGHT BE DR. TRAN NGOC NINH, WHO WAS EDUCATION MINISTER UNDER KY 1965-66. A DEVOUT BUDDHIST AND CLOSE FRIEND OF TRI QUANG, HE HAS NOT PARTICIPATED ACTIVELY IN POLITICS FOR MANY YEARS BUT IS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS AN QUANG'S "RESERVE CARD." MUCH ~~LESS~~ LESS SECTARIAN AND MORE RESPONSIBLE THAN VU VAN MAU, HE WOULD PROBABLY, UNLIKE MAU OR "BIG" MINH, BE ACCEPTABLE TO CATHOLICS AND THE ARMY AS WELL AS TO ANQUANG. HE IS ABLE, ARTICULATE, AND REPUTEDLY ABSOLUTELY HONEST.

WHETHER THIEU STAYS OR GOES, THERE IS DANGER OF POLITICAL UNRAVELLING. CONTINUING AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR THIEU RISKS EXACERBATING ANTI-AMERICAN STRAINS IN THE PROCESS. AMERICAN CONSENT TO REMOVAL OF THIEU WOULD IMPROVE THE PROSPECTS FOR A RELATIVELY SMOOTH TRANSITION, THOUGH THE DANGERS OF A NASTY SITUATION DEVELOPING ARE CONSIDERABLE, NO MATTER WHAT THE USG DOES OR DOES NOT DO. OBVIOUSLY THE DANGERS OF UNRAVELLING WOULD BE LESSENED BY AN ORDERLY, CONSTITUTIONAL TURNOVER, MADE SOONER RATHER THAN LATER. THE DANGERS WOULD BE APPRECIABLY GREATER IF A CHANGE WERE EFFECTED BY A COUP OR MASS DEMONSTRATIONS AFTER FURTHER DETERIORATION OF THE MILITARY, SOCIAL, AND POLITICAL SITUATION.

S E C R E T

C. "THIRD FORCE" ELEMENTS ARE NOT LIKELY TO PLAY A DECISIVE ROLE IN THE IMMEDIATE FUTURE. LEADERS LIKE FATHER THANH--WHO PROBABLY DOES NOT CONSIDER HIMSELF "THIRD FORCE"--AND "BIG" MINH--WHO PROBABLY DOES--ARE RELUCTANT TO FOMENT DEMONSTRATIONS WHICH COULD AID THE COMMUNISTS. THE MORE RADICAL WOULD-BE "THIRD FORCE" LEADERS, SUCH AS MME NGO BA THANH, TRAN NGOC LIENG, OR THICH PHAP LAN, APPEAR TO BE INTIMIDATED BY THE POLICE AND, IN ANY EVENT, HAVE FEW FOLLOWERS. IF A GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNION WERE FORMED, SOME "THIRD FORCE" POLITICIANS, BROADLY DEFINED, WOULD PROBABLY PARTICIPATE. JUST HOW FAR LEFT SUCH A GOVERNMENT MIGHT TILT WOULD DEPEND UPON THE NEW PRIME MINISTER, THE ROLE, IF ANY, OF THIEU, THE MILITARY SITUATION, AND OTHER CIRCUMSTANCES, NOT LEAST AMONG THEM THE AMERICAN ATTITUDE. A GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNION COULD BE EXPECTED TO HAVE APPRECIABLY BETTER RELATIONS THAN THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT WITH "THIRD FORCE" ELEMENTS, WHATEVER THE ACTUAL "THIRD FORCE" PARTICIPATION. MANY "THIRD FORCE" POLITICIANS, NARROWLY DEFINED, WOULD PROBABLY OPPOSE JOINING OR OFFICIALLY SUPPORTING ANY SECOND REPUBLIC GOVERNMENT, ON THE GROUNDS THAT BY DOING SO THEY WOULD CEASE BEING "THIRD FORCE" AND WOULD LOSE THEIR PUTATIVE ABILITY TO RECONCILE NATIONALISTS AND COMMUNISTS. VO DINH CUONG, TREASURER OF THE AN QUANG-SUPPORTED NATIONAL RECONCILIATION FORCE (NRF), IS A LEADING EXAMPLE OF THIS ATTITUDE, WHICH IS NOT YET THE DOMINANT NRF OR AN QUANG ATTITUDE, THOUGH IT MIGHT BECOME SO IF THE MILITARY BALANCE CONTINUES TO TIP TOWARDS THE COMMUNISTS.

THE "THIRD FORCE," BROADLY DEFINED, IS NUMEROUS, BUT IT IS UNARMED, LARGELY UNORGANIZED, DIVIDED, AND INCHOATE. ITS MOST IMPORTANT ELEMENT, AN QUANG, HAS JUST LOST CONTACT WITH MOST OF ITS CONSTITUENCY, WHICH HAS ALWAYS BEEN IN CENTRAL VIETNAM. THIS COULD HAVE UNFORESEEN CONSEQUENCES FOR AN QUANG INFLUENCE AND POSITION.

A NEGOTIATED CEASE-FIRE, ESPECIALLY IF ACCOMPANIED BY ESTABLISHMENT OF A NATIONAL COUNCIL OF NATIONAL RECONCILIATION AND CONCORD AND ELECTIONS, WOULD DOUBTLESS BRING

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"THIRD FORCE" ELEMENTS OF MANY COLORS TO THE FORE. IN THESE CIRCUMSTANCES MOST OF THEM WOULD PROBABLY SIDE MORE AND MORE WITH THE RIGHT AGAINST THE LEFT, AS IN LAOS, THOUGH IT IS UNLIKELY THAT THIS POLITICAL GAIN COULD OVERCOME THE MILITARY AND ORGANIZATIONAL ADVANTAGES OF THE COMMUNISTS.

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